



BPL News

VOL. 25, NO. 1

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

SPRING 1974

DWIGGINS' LEGACY

It was an ideal situation on Tuesday evening, January 15th. The Boston Public Library presented its first annual William Addison Dwiggins Lecture and invited a cousin and co-worker of the renowned graphic arts expert to deliver it. Laurance B. Siegfried, Professor of Graphic Arts Emeritus, Syracuse University School of Journalism, shared with more than 300 people vivid recollections of the noted illustrator and type designer for whom the lectures are named. A recognized authority on his subject, Professor Siegfried was at one time editor of *American Printer* magazine and has written extensively on typography. Following the lecture, the audience was invited to a special opening of the William A. Dwiggins Room located off the Rare Books and Manuscripts' new quarters.

Saying that he "felt as though he had been resurrected," Prof. Siegfried began his oral biography of Bill Dwiggins with a description of his "den with a north light" at 69 Cornhill where many of the line drawings for Paine Furniture Co. were made. While there, Dwiggins also designed some of the greeting cards published by Alfred Bartlett, a reputable special publisher of the time whose business was located at the same address.

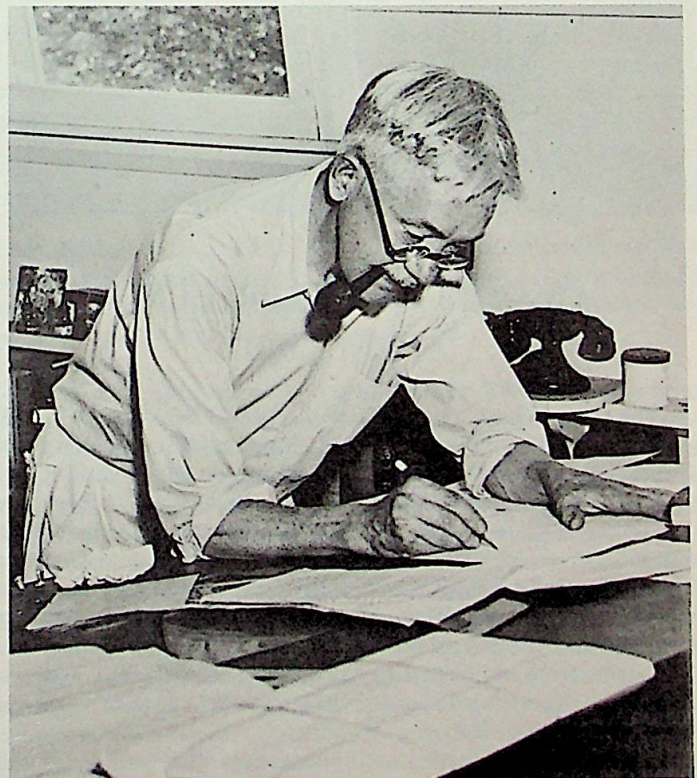
Laurance Siegfried is one of the last survivors of a graphic arts era which produced such leaders as Dr. Robert Leslie, Rudolf Ruzicka (who recently redesigned the Harvard diploma while in his 90's), D.B. Updike, Bruce Rogers, Fred Goudy, Carl Rollins, Harry Gage, the Grabhorns out on the Pacific Coast, and a half dozen others. That era is almost a thing of the past, with due respect to Herman Zapf, the type designer. Few private presses and individuals are keeping up the old traditions, doing so for fun rather than for large scale reproduction or for profit.

Dwiggins and Siegfried worked, rather had "fun," in producing jointly six issues of what the latter has described as "probably one of the crummiest publications available" - a magazine entitled *Vague* in which appeared stories on the "Far Away Land of Lurg." Maurice Sendak might well have been inspired by the animals of that far land, by its wing-like ampus, its grabbedoroon, and other wild animals. Prof. Siegfried reported it haunted kids so much that they had to discontinue it.

In an occasional bulletin of the White Elephant Press, Dwiggins analyzed the structure of individual letter forms in a way Prof. Siegfried had never seen before. In answer to Jay Hambidge's *Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, in which he wrote about the golden rectangle, WAD came out with a purple sexagon (a six-sided figure) in each corner of which there were letters spelling out BUMART. That was the last time Dwiggins and Siegfried heard from Mr. Hambidge. Together the two men then set up a publishing company with the improbable name Püterschein's Publishing Co., giving it a fictional parent company of Thedam Püterschein's Sons. The name came from a shining piece of pewter which happened to be on the spot at the time Prof. Siegfried was visiting. The two men went further and named Thedam Püterschein as president and gave him an equally fictitious staff of Hermann and Jacob Püterschein, 1st and 2nd vice presidents respectively. Their names appeared on the company's letterhead. One of the publications of this imaginative press was the "Fabulist," a quarterly which actually came out only three times. In the first issue, Siegfried wrote a three-page "definitive" genealogy tracing the Püterschein family to the fifteenth century. At the end of this there was a wood-cut spread by WAD. In the second issue, there were two illustrations which represented WAD's first use of what became his trademark, his stencil technique. In the "Fabulist" WAD used six colors and black. Siegfried set the type for this issue in 14 Pt. Cavende 371. The black was printed and the color was applied with a sawed-off shaving brush. Although 300 copies were supposedly printed, there were actually no more than 200.

In his annual collection of the best short stories, Edward J. O'Brien selected one written by WAD for the first issue of the "Fabulist" entitled "La Dernière Mobilisation." It was actually a

(Continued on page 4)



Dwiggins at his drawing board.

(Continued from page 1)

play in which the dead had moved out of their graves in Belgium due to German oppression and were moving down into France.

For the third and last edition of the "Fabulist" WAD hand-lettered the entire text. Carl Rollins printed it at Yale University Press. Across the Press's archer on the front of the issue, WAD put the initials TSTL meaning "the sky's the limit!"

Channeling his inventiveness in another direction, WAD designed some kites which Miss Dorothy Abbe, a long-time friend and associate, describes as "mobiles." Whatever they were called — kite, mobile, triangular sail, etc. — WAD's design called for a sail which ran up the string of the kite carrying with it a cork. When the cork reached the top of the string it would hit another cork causing it to open up a packet and thereupon unload its contents. The practical purpose for this invention escapes the pragmatic mind of this writer, but one can see it being used in some mischievous way.

WAD was responsible for *An Investigation into the Physical Properties of Books*, which was purported to be a series of interviews with various people representing one of the branches or phases of the book publishing trade. The interviews were about the different physical properties of any book. Copyrighted in 1919, the book contained a chart which showed the percentage of excellence. The frontispiece was a graph which went to the bottom and broke up the lettering there. WAD's book came out four years before the American Institute of Graphic Arts exhibitions. As a result of the book, a letter written in perfect seriousness was sent to the Society of Calligraphers.

Out of Dwiggins' efforts was born the Society of Calligraphers, which was to include twenty-five deserving graphic artists or others in the book world who were to receive a certificate signed by the non-existent Hermann Pütterschein, President of the Society of Calligraphers, and by W. A. Dwiggins, Secretary. Among those deemed to be deserving was the late Newark librarian, John Cotton Dana.

In 1928, WAD worked on a layout and advertising book - *Layout in Advertising* - which did not contain a single reproduction of a contemporary advertisement. Paul Hollister talked Bill Dwiggins into preparing the book illustrations. Dwiggins accepted the challenge and designed line drawings for all the illustrations without resorting to an ad of the day before he shipped it off to the publisher, Harper's.

Dwiggins attributed his boost in the general public's eye to two articles. One of them was written by Mr. Siegfried's classmate, Paul Hollister. It appeared in the periodical, *Direct Advertising*. The other, written by Mr. Siegfried, appeared in the book industry's periodical, *Publishers Weekly*, under the title "So These Are Dwiggins."

Of the three publishers Dwiggins designed for, he worked on the largest number of books for Alfred Knopf. Dwiggins designed some 300 books for him. Knopf probably had a greater influence on book design than any other single publisher. He set up certain ideals for the printing character of his books, and WAD met the challenge. The other publishers WAD designed books for were Random House and Overbrook Press.

As a book designer, Bill Dwiggins was an experimenter. During an opening day speech for the "Fifty Books of the Year" exhibit at the New York Public Library, Mr. Siegfried noted that of the three or four top designers "Bill was probably the only one who had the courage to risk an experiment." In the third row at that opening were D. B. Updike and Dwiggins' rival, Bruce Rogers. After the talk, Rogers - who could be sarcastic at times - quite briefly concurred.

An example of this courage is evident in his design for H. G. Wells's early science fiction, *Seven Famous Novels*. Contrary to the



Prof. Laurance B. Siegfried

general thoughts in publishing of that time, WAD placed Wells's fantasies in a double column layout. He used his famous stencil technique to illustrate the book.

For all his crafted and designed publications, WAD believed machines could produce good work and he set out to prove that good books could come off the linotype presses. Up to that time, the stems and hairlines of type faces were given the same weight. The Futura type face was one of many which were monotone types. Dwiggins changed this by thinking in terms of "thicks and thins." Some of his lines taper. He also designed a heavy form of the Metro sans serif type. Commenting about them, Mr. Siegfried said "not the little things that can't sit down because they don't have the wherewithall!"

Dwiggins created five typefaces now in general use, five others were experimental, and a total of 18 different faces which breathed life into a stodgy printing industry. One of the faces now in use is the Caledonia.

Mr. Siegfried pointed to the Caledonia type face as being the most model type face, and probably the most popular to be designed by Dwiggins. It was designed as an improvement over the old Scotch Roman. Calling it the "most readable book face anyone has ever created," Siegfried attributed this fact to the type's comparative roundness of letters which tends to carry the eye from letter to letter facilitating reading. Mr. Siegfried contrasted the Caledonia's roundness to the often-used Bodoni type face's vertical which tend to retard the eye.

Among other type faces designed by Dwiggins are the Electra and the Falcon. He used the Electra in a book entitled "El Dorado" published by Fred Anthoensen. The Falcon was the result of WAD's improvement of the very stiff and heavy Garamond type face which came from the Stemple foundry in Germany.

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

In a collection of essays entitled *MSS by WAD* (1919), there are several examples of Dwiggins' writings on the graphic arts. In a half-serious style, Dwiggins wrote a booklet about the design of U.S. currency, attacking in it the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington. He agreed with Paul Hollister who compared the dollar bill to a basement filled with spare auto parts.

Dwiggins' writing ability extended to the stories he either wrote or adapted for use with his marionettes. He carved figures which stand 12" high and used them to entertain friends who visited his little theater across from his home in Hingham. WAD designed both the staging and the mechanism which operated the figures. His expertise with this medium of expression brought about his book, *Marionette in Motion*, an authoritative work still being used in college theater departments.

Mr. Siegfried described the marionettes with the comment, "I've never seen the likes of those." Miss Dorothy Abbe wrote a book about the marionettes which Mr. Siegfried described as "really a classic." The marionette collection will become part of the Library's theater collection this year and will be on view to the public in an especially designed theater.

Through all his work and the reminiscences of his friends, notably Mr. Siegfried and Miss Abbe, Dwiggins may be seen as an imaginative, creative, highly intelligent man imbued with a fine sense of humor and with an innate simplicity which freed him from any confining bonds, allowing his spirit to soar like the kites he designed, forever leaving behind the packets of his delightful inspirations.

It's understandable why Philip Hofer, formerly of Harvard's Houghton Library, summarized Dwiggins in number two of "The Dolphin" (1935) with the statement, "He was the only one who came closer to being the present-day Leonardo than anybody I know."

In conclusion, Mr. Siegfried quoted from something Bill Dwiggins wrote in 1921. That was more than 50 years ago and most of WAD's career still lay ahead of him. The quote was taken from the third issue of "Fabulist" and, as far as Mr. Siegfried knew, it has never been reprinted or republished elsewhere. It very aptly catches the spirit of Dwiggins.

"Myself, I hope to live in a land that I have made out of potsherds and broken bits. It is not a well-articulated country, and it is not different from a many that other people have made. There are old things in it, but it is not old. I manage to have arched masonry dug out of Rome, and Greek fragments of marble, but the colonists from Greece have forgotten their fatherland, and pasture their cattle under the columns. There are glints from the East in the land if there are really no Easterners there. I use words to furnish this part of the country—Samarkand and Ispahan. They do as much as real colonists would, and much more musically. I do not need real things in this part, I choose rather invocations of memories or imaginings. All the claptrap of Oriental imagery serves me very well,—dust and sun and faded bright colors. There are no cities, and there are only the more picturesque sorts of merchants. How the inhabitants live I am not too much inclined to ask being overclose to the problem myself in this part of the world. But they are mostly countrymen and work in the soil.

"You will see that the country is hopelessly romantic, hopelessly to you, I mean. For a time back I was ashamed of its nearness to ruined Rome and hid its existence. Now I have grown careless about your opinions & am inclined to live in whatever land I please."

Through the Dwiggins collection at the Boston Public Library, his "land" will be shared by generations to come.



William A. Dwiggins 1880-1956

William Addison Dwiggins, the internationally recognized graphic artist was born in Martinsville, Ohio. Years later, he studied with Frederic Goudy, a type designer, at the Holme School of Illustration in Chicago. He followed Goudy in 1904 to Hingham where he had relocated at the Village Press at 45 Lincoln Street. When Goudy left Hingham, Dwiggins remained there with his wife Mabel for 52 years working in a studio across from his home on Irving Street.

He began his advertising layout career making hundreds of drawings for newspaper ads for the Paine Furniture Company. In 1922, when told he had diabetes, he left commercial work for an artistic career. In 1923 he wrote and designed his book *Layout Advertising* which was reissued in 1948.

His attack on several designers of the early 1900's in *An Investigation into the Physical Properties of Books* (1919) led to an association with publisher Alfred A. Knopf for whom he designed 300 books.

Formal recognition came first in the form of a study grant in Europe in 1908, then honorary membership in the Society of Printers, membership in London's Double Crown Club, a prestigious typographical society, and in 1928 *Publisher's Weekly* designated the twelve months as Dwiggins Year.

The American Institute of Graphic Arts awarded him its Gold Medal in 1928, Harvard gave him an honorary degree in 1947, the Bookbuilders of Boston exhibited his work at the Boston Public Library in 1948, and the next year Dwiggins was made a fellow of the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He was founder of the Putterschein Press, and, later, of the mythical Society of Calligraphers.

He carved a marionette in 1930 for the production of a marionette play by his friends which led him to construct a complete theater with a cast of marionettes on the first floor of his studio in 1937.

Invited to join the Boston Watercolor Society, "he whipped up two in a couple of weeks" although he had never worked in watercolor medium, drawing much attention in a society exhibition.

Artist, type designer extraordinary, mural painter, costume designer, book designer, sculptor, playwright, satirist, advertising layout specialist, philosopher, poet, all describe a singularly individual. Famous among the world's well-known figures among the children who shared the joy of his marionette show, his death on Christmas Day in 1956 brought to a close a full life.



BPL NEWS

Issued by the Boston Public Library, Copley Square,
Massachusetts 02117.

Philip Driscoll
Helen H. Sevagian

Assistant to the